



**Andreas Malm**, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*, London: Verso, 2021. ISBN: 9781839760259 (paper); ISBN: 9781839760266 (ebook)

Andreas Malm’s incendiary new book, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, calls for increased militancy in defense of the climate. Criticizing the fetishization of symbolic forms of nonviolent civil disobedience epitomized by Extinction Rebellion (XR), Malm questions when climate activists will “start physically attacking the things that consume our planet and destroy them with our own hands” (p.9). He particularly extols the actions of Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya, two women who conducted a direct-action campaign repeatedly sabotaging the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Malm presents this action as emblematic of new forms of climate mobilization that actively seek to undercut the profit margins of fossil capitalism. Malm wants activists to disrupt not only literal oil pipelines but also the larger infrastructure fueling carbon emissions. Noting that such forms of mobilization have been rare, he argues that aversion to more militant tactics – specifically property destruction – has limited the success of climate activism. As the climate emergency expands, Malm suggests that such forms of militancy will become increasingly necessary to create political and economic pressure for change.

Making this argument, Malm extends a lengthy debate in social movement literatures over mobilization strategies. The bulk of the book consists of an invective against the XR advocacy of an exclusively symbolic campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on the climate emergency. The founders of XR explicitly ground their strategy in a reading of social movement history, particularly Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan’s study of movements against authoritarian governments. In their book *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) argue that campaigns of nonviolent resistance are more than twice as effective at replacing authoritarian regimes. In contrast, they argue that violent insurgencies rarely achieve their goals. In the first chapter, Malm both challenges this account of social movement history and its applicability to contemporary climate activism.

Malm charges that the advocates of strategic pacificism mythologize processes of social change, regularly obfuscating the significant role that campaigns of sabotage, occupations, and insurgency played in abolitionist, suffragette, decolonization, civil rights, and anti-apartheid movements. The historic efficacy of nonviolent movements needs to be understood in relation to the background threat of militant insurgencies. While figures such as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are canonized for their roles as leaders of nonviolent struggles, their leadership was always challenged by those, such as Subhas Chandra Bose and Malcolm X, who were willing to adopt more militant tactics. Thus, Malm argues that property destruction should not be understood as antithetical to creating mass mobilizations. Rather, he suggests that the moral suasion of moderate movement factions can be bolstered by the threats of economic and political disruption posed by militants. Invoking Herbert H. Haines' (1988) classic *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*, Malm argues that the radical flank of a movement can have positive as well as negative effects on its campaign. As Haines describes in relation to the history of Black struggle in the US, militants can create political crises that authorities seek to ameliorate through concessions to moderates. Revisiting struggles from the abolition of slavery to the Arab Spring, Malm highlights the important synergies between different movement tactics and factions, as well as the unpredictable potential of crowds erupting in unarmed collective violence.

Malm also cautions that analogues between contemporary climate activism and historic struggles for justice need to be attentive to different contexts and conditions that inform movement dynamics. Emphatically, he argues that addressing climate change is not like overthrowing a dictatorship. While changing a political regime can occur rapidly following weeks of protests in the streets, fossil fuel consumption lies at the heart of our economic system and will necessarily involve a long transition. Thus, it is much more like slavery, a system of economic production imbricated with an entrenched set of property relations, which took decades to overturn. Moreover, while most social movements focus on overcoming historic

injustices, climate activism is oriented towards preventing the vicious impacts of climatic change on future generations. The unique temporality of climate change, and the way that feedback loops will intensify its impacts the longer it goes unaddressed, imbues climate activism with a particular sense of urgency.

In these circumstances, Malm advances an argument for the necessity, feasibility, and theoretical underpinnings of increased militancy in climate activism. His starting point is the desperate need to prohibit the development of new sources of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and deactivate existing fossil fuel infrastructure. Simply stated, for emissions to be contained, the global supply of fossil fuels cannot be fully exploited, significant reserves need to remain in the ground and existing pipelines and power plants must be abandoned. This means that the current owners of fossil fuel resources and infrastructure will not be able to realize the value of their properties. Thus, foundationally climate action necessitates the erosion of fossil property rights. Ultimately, Malm argues that state power is needed to delimit these property rights and enforce the prohibition on continued CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. However, the climate movement has not been able to effectively achieve state power, and Malm stresses that the imminent threat of climate change requires consideration of what strategies could enhance its impact.

While XR and other advocates of symbolic strategies of nonviolent resistance emphasize that state and corporate actors have far greater capacity to deploy violence than social movements, Malm argues that fossil capitalism also relies on a diffuse energy infrastructure vulnerable to disruption. To demonstrate this vulnerability, Malm stresses how other political movements have used pipeline and power plant sabotage to strategic effect. For instance, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation or MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress, targeted state-owned energy facilities as part of its campaign against the South African apartheid state a half century ago. The campaign crippled the security apparatus of the South African apartheid state, undermining its political and economic capacity, while symbolically demonstrating its vulnerability. More recently, Houthi rebels in Yemen have employed

unmanned drones to attack the state energy apparatus. Malm invokes liberation movements' tactical use of infrastructural sabotage to highlight how those struggling to survive and overthrow oppressive regimes have regularly targeted energy infrastructures. Energy infrastructures present particular sites of vulnerability, particularly in developed Northern countries, as they are geographically extensive and underpin the political economy of fossil capitalism.

Malm also recognizes that the desperate urgency of the climate crisis requires careful consideration of the potential negative impacts of more militant actions on the broader movement. Militancy can backfire, discrediting a cause and justifying state repression. It would be inexcusable if militant actions delegitimized the climate movement and rationalized its violent repression. Thus, Malm, first, recognizes the preferability of nonviolent mobilizations if they prove effective. Increasing militancy should only be a product of necessity, not the first choice. Second, he stresses the need to delineate different kinds of militant action. Malm particularly distinguishes property destruction from harm to life itself. Indeed, disabling fossil infrastructure and limiting carbon emissions into the atmosphere could serve to protect life from the tremendous destruction from the intensifying storms, melting ice, and rising seas associated with the climate crisis. Malm stresses the need to adopt tactics that minimize any potential loss of life, while increasing economic pressure against ecologically destructive activities and symbolically exposing the illogics of fossil capitalism. Malm also stresses the need to be attentive to the social impacts of disruptions, differentiating forms of luxury emissions, such as air travel, from subsistence emissions, such as rice paddy farming. In his view, actions should deter the expansion of fossil capitalism but not endanger people or induce public fear.

As an example of the increased militancy he advocates, Malm describes a 2007 campaign by a group calling itself *Asfaltsdjungeln Indianer* (Indians of the Concrete Jungle) in which people would descend upon wealthy Swedish neighborhoods, deflating SUV tires in the middle of the night. SUV sales in the country had risen for years as a status luxury good, despite their

greater carbon emissions and impracticality in the urban environment. However, the summer campaign, in which Malm admitted participating, briefly reversed this trend. As the snows came, the saboteurs discontinued their activities to ensure that no one was harmed in winter driving conditions. Malm laments that the suspension would prove permanent, as the climate movement oriented to more symbolic actions.

He contrasts this mobilization with XR strategy, which despite its stressed nonviolence, has at times been dreadfully inattentive to the impacts of its actions on people's livelihoods. Drawing on the strategies of mobilizing to overthrow autocrats, XR has focused on nonviolent mass actions. Their campaigns have not differentiated between subsistence and luxury practices. As an example of this disregard, Malm highlights how XR activists disrupted the traffic at a London tube station as they unfurled a banner that read: "Business As Usual = DEATH" (p.124). The action disrupted a public transportation system that is a key alternative to cars, disproportionately used by people of color, and relied upon by people to get to work. Unsurprisingly, this action raised the ire of commuters. As frustrated commuters sought to pull the XR activists from the roof of the train, one of the white protesters kicked a Black commuter in the head. Rather disowning this act as violence unbecoming of the movement, an XR spokesperson defended this as self-defense. Malm excoriates the entire episode and the movement response to it as reeking of privilege: "alienating precisely the people who have the least to gain from continued business-as-usual" (p.127).

The final section of the book challenges those who would abandon the struggle to defend civilization. On the one hand, Malm challenges those, such as Roy Scranton, who suggest that we should simply accept the inevitability of the emergent climate emergency. In his recent book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Scranton (2015) argues that climate activism is futile, suggesting that people must instead embrace the inevitability of climate change and ultimately death. Malm flatly refuses this defeatism and convincingly argues that as the effects of climate change intensify it has become increasingly imperative for us to take action to mitigate them. On

the other hand, Malm upbraids the anti-mass politics of groups such as Deep Green Resistance. In their book, *Deep Green Resistance*, Aric McBay, Lierre Keith and Derrick Jensen (2011) argue that civilization is irreparable and mainstream environmentalism should simply be abandoned. Ultimately, the authors suggest that radical activists should not transform but destroy civilization, going so far as to demand an end to agriculture and a mass depopulation of the globe. While Malm critiques the limits of mainstream environmentalism, he is still interested in providing it increased leverage to negotiate a just transition from fossil capitalism. Malm rightly condemns the genocidal designs of Deep Green Resistance for the global majority. Instead, he argues that climate activists should not target the very idea of organized social life, but rather “a particular deformed kind of civilization – namely, that erected on the plinth of fossil capital – and tear it down so that another form of civilization can endure” (p.157).

I emphatically concur with Malm’s assessment of *Learning to Die* and *Deep Green Resistance*; climate activists must continue to fight for necessary changes and seek to engage a broad public. However, Malm’s arguments tend to focus on strategic orientations in Europe and neglect important considerations within a necessarily global movement. By way of his focus, his analysis stresses the agency of Europeans to make change and understates the importance of decolonial and postcolonial struggles in the broader world.

Analysis needs to extend beyond consumptive activities in the Global North. Focusing on the domain of consumption displaces analysis from the central dynamics driving the growth in emissions under fossil capitalism. In the book, Malm tends to focus on luxury goods, such as SUVs that could be effectively replaced with more energy efficient cars, and the fleet of giant yachts of the super-rich that are simply unnecessary. However, the fundamental problem is not conspicuous forms of luxury transportation that rich folks use to flaunt their wealth; rather, the issue centers on the flows of capital that are driving economic growth and the ongoing exploitation of cheap energy sources within globally disaggregated production networks. Instead of focusing on consumptive activities, analysis needs to centrally consider the capital relations

that underpin economic growth (and expanded consumption). These relations are not driven by the commodity fetishism of luxury goods but the reinvestment of profits to accumulate greater wealth. Seeking to maximize rates of profits, companies seek the cheapest production costs, including cheap fuel and cheap labor in global antipodes. These dynamics provide a competitive advantage to innovative firms that effectively cut costs, but also drive growth and expanding rates of consumption as goods become cheaper to produce. Malm rightly notes how deeply fossil fuels are imbricated in the global economic system; however, his tactical focus does not delve into how to actually transform this system. Although luxury consumption appears an obvious target, deflating SUV tires and even sinking yachts will not fundamentally interrupt the capital flows driving climate change.

In his analysis, Malm stresses that distinguishing between luxury and subsistence activities must be central to campaigns and policies to limit carbon emissions; however, he understates how difficult it is to discern the boundary between subsistence and luxury consumption in the fossil economy. While distinction between the necessity of a luxury yacht and a subsistence rice paddy is clear, capital relations have penetrated our lives in myriad ways and a large number of people rely on the continuation of fossil capitalism for their very livelihood. Without effective public transportation in their communities, many suburbanites rely on cars to get to work. Malm recognizes this to an extent, noting that the productive forces of capitalism “often – although at a falling rate – cater to some human needs” (p.104). However, he presents human needs as a transparent category. They are not. Needs are socially defined, and if social life is organized around the automobile, as it is in Florida where I live, it is difficult to participate in society without it. These issues continue to be exacerbated, as new forms of development continue to make life dependent on expanding carbon emissions. As Caitlin Jones and I have described, the continued development of suburbs and the public road infrastructure to support them is extending automobile dependency in Florida (Jones and McCreary 2021).

Moreover, as capitalists accumulate evermore wealth, they seek new opportunities for investment, expanding markets into increasing domains of social life – for instance, expanding markets for home appliances or automobiles. This leads to not only increasing carbon emissions, but also the broader subsumption of life to capital. Is a frozen processed dinner subsistence or luxury when a family is pressed for time because of the pressures of modern life? Noting this is not to suggest that resisting fossil capital is futile, but to insist that analysis needs to address how we can fundamentally reorganize social life to decrease fossil fuel consumption. While the effects of fossil capital are disrupting the environmental relations that constitute the basic conditions of life, the increased subsumption of life to capital is simultaneously deepening the extent to which people’s livelihoods are entangled with and reliant upon the continuation of capitalist relations. Moreover, as consumption increases so does relative poverty – pushing people to strive for greater levels of consumption to prove their social worth. Ultimately, we cannot simply rupture the infrastructure of fossil capitalism upon which people rely; we must replace it and the culture of consumption that it has produced.

The absence of alternatives haunts *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. In the book, Malm calls for the transformation of a deformed civilization built upon fossil capital in order that others may live, but never addresses what these alternative societies may be. We see activists, such as Reznicek and Montoya or the Swedes operating under the moniker *Asfaltdjungelns Indianer*, destroying property (or at least disrupting its use) in the name of Indigenous peoples. While Malm admits that *Asfaltdjungelns Indianer* was “a silly and even inappropriate name” (p.80), he underplays the symbolic importance of Indigenous ways of life to challenging capitalism. The Swedes’ invocation of the idea of Indigeneity here is undoubtedly a form of cultural appropriation, but its symbolism bears broader consideration. In order to disrupt the exploitative relations to the Earth that underpin fossil capitalism, we need to recognize other ways that people construct communities socially and ecologically. In his book, Malm focuses only on the destruction of the relations of fossil capitalism and neglects the importance of articulating



alternatives. Indigenous peoples demonstrate that there are other ways to live and thus present a vital symbolic threat to fossil capitalism, denaturalizing property relations that are often taken-for-granted and demonstrating how they are underpinned by violence.

Indigenous peoples are not only victims of fossil capitalism, but also leading movements contesting it. Across the world, the fight against pipelines has been led by groups such as the Kichwa in Ecuador, the Ogoni in Nigeria, the Lakota in the United States, and the Wet'suwet'en in Canada. These groups have adopted a range of tactics, as they deem appropriate to their contexts, including not only litigation and lobbying, but also occupations and blockades, and in certain instances sabotage. Elsewhere Malm (2018) has recognized the importance of defending those societies that have managed to escape the hold of fossil capital and establish more sustainable relations. Malm powerfully critiques XR's disregard for questions of inequality and the need to minimize impacts on subsistence activities. However, he only focuses on possibilities for resistance at the center of Empire, understating the importance of resistance by those at the edges the fossil economy and most often displaced by its expansion and impacts.

Despite his heavy emphasis on the need to denaturalize the property relations underpinning fossil capitalism, Malm does not examine the importance of struggles over the land to future developments. Property is the condition of possibility for the unfolding of fossil capitalism, as Malm suggests, but property destruction is not the only or even the primary way in which the infrastructure of fossil capitalism can be challenged. For instance, Indigenous peoples' legal and political claims present powerful challenges to the land tenure on which pipelines rest. These challenges are particularly potent because of the reliance of fossil capital on the material infrastructures facilitating the flow of oil and gas. Thus, the land rights of subsistence communities not only stand to be impacted by the unfolding climate crisis, but also may lay near the heart of strategies aiming to challenge it.

While fossil fuel is disproportionately consumed in metropolitan centers, the movement to transform it extends along the infrastructural network on which it relies. Malm challenges the

myopia of metropolitan movements such as XR, and emphasizes the need to pay greater attention to issues of subsistence. However, strategic analysis still needs to be carried further. Specifically, it needs to recognize the puissance of struggles over livelihood on energy frontiers.

## References

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